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Women, English and Empowerment: Voices from Rural Bangladesh

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Abstract: English has been an integral part of Bangladesh education system since her independence in 1971. The process of globalization has transformed the lives of million in the developing world like Bangladesh. The rise of globalization has also meant a growing awareness of the use of English and its possible impact on the lives of people. However, there has not been adequate research conducted which could find a direct link between English and empowerment. The role of English and its impact on the socio-economic growth of individuals didn't get much attention. Moreover, there has been inadequate attention to understanding of the relationship between English and its role on women's empowerment in rural community. With this background this study is an attempt to contribute to our understanding of the socio-economic orientation of women by analyzing the impact of English in Bangladesh through a qualitative approach. It provides a useful understanding of the need for English language in specific areas of work. Based on such needs, it will attempt to provide insights for the planning of sustainable intervention strategies for the development of English language skills for women in Bangladesh.

Keywords: English language, Women, Rural, development and empowerment

INTRODUCTION

English skills have created new economic and social opportunities all over the world. Their use, however, continues to be governed by existing power relations in our society whereby women frequently experience relative disadvantage. English skills can facilitate women's participation in different sectors and different regions. Project English (2009), a project on English in Sri Lanka, mentions.

High proficiency in English is seen to be essential for socio-economic development in India and Sri Lanka ... The impact of globalisation and economic development has made English the 'language of opportunity' and a vital means of improving prospects for well-paid employment).

A recent collection looks into the increasing awareness in the developing world that English can play a role in socioeconomic empowerment (Erling, Seargeant, et al, 2013). Erling and Power (2014) in their synthesis report with a cautious note mentioned "while English might play a role in individual's earning power, other variables clearly have an important effect. Since women in Bangladesh have marginalised socio-economic status because of existing gender inequality in the society, the research aimed to find out to what extent English may play a role in women's empowerment in Bangladesh. Gender inequality in most of the cases is based on traditional gender roles and male governed sociocultural restrictions imposed on women's mobility and participation in public spheres. Along with the gender roles, social structures are also fundamental in determining who gets access to English education and who is deprived of this opportunity.

This study is an attempt to contribute to our understanding of the nature of the socio-economic position of women by analyzing the impact of English in Bangladesh through a qualitative approach. It attempts to provide an understanding of the need for English language skills in specific areas. It also attempts to provide insights for the planning of sustainable intervention strategies for the development of English language for women.

The purpose of the research was to document the impact of English on the lives of women in Bangladesh.

The aims in general were to investigate:

- The nature that the role of English plays for women in different employment sectors, in rural areas.
- The extent to which English language skills can contribute to the socio-economic empowerment of women in rural Bangladesh.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research method was used Interview schedule was designed to create case studies of the participants based on their professions. The sectors chosen were Garments, Primary School teaching, small and Medium Industries (SME), NGO workers and Health-care. Interview questions centered on family situation, educational background and financial circumstances. self-evaluation of English proficiency, extent of its use at workplace, opportunities and prospects of improving English language skills and scope for the use of English at workplace, participants perceptions about the role of English for employment opportunities.

All respondents were working women, belonging to five different professional fields: Garments workers, primary school teachers, health workers, SME sector and NGO workers.

These professional fields are those most commonly chosen by educated young women in rural Bangladesh. The educational background of the respondents varied from 'SSC' to Master's degree. Income of respondents varied from Tk. 3000/- to Tk. 16,000. (\$40 to \$200). The age range of respondents was 23 to 40. Thus respondents chosen for the study represent a cross-section of women at work with varying degrees of chances of needing or not needing English, and varying attitudes towards English and its importance for their personal and professional development.

Research context

The research was based on one urban site and one rural site. The rural site selected for the research was rural Dhamrai. Dhamrai is situated about 40 kilometres north-west of Dhaka district. The total size of Dhamrai upazila [sub-district] is 75,963 acres and the total population is 4,112,418 with the density of 1342 persons per square kilometre (Population Census, 2011). The Upazilla is bounded by Savar upazila on the east and Saturia and Nagarpur upazila on the west; Mirzapur and Kaliakair upazila on the north and Singair upazila on the south. Rural literacy rate of Dhamrai is 40.90% (*Banglapedia*, 2012). Dhamrai

is agriculture dominated and is famous for the annual Jogonnath Roth Jatra festival, a religiously significant festival for the Hindus and metal casting industry.

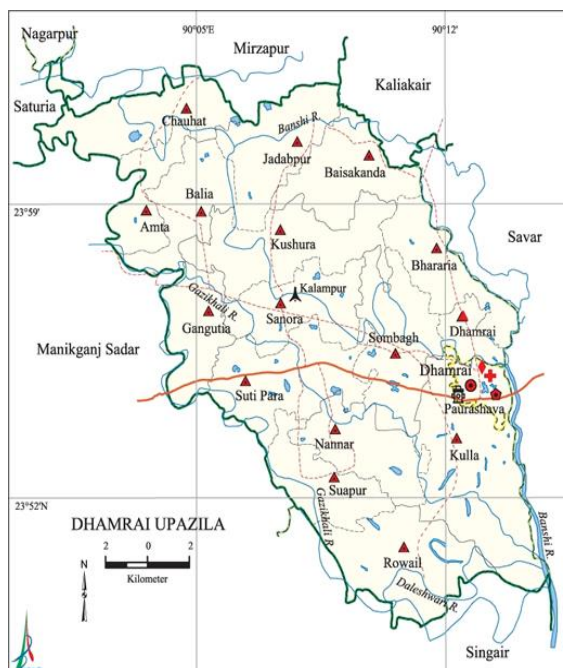


Figure 1 Dhamrai

Instruments

- **Semi-structured interview:** The primary instrument which was selected for gathering data was a semi-structured interview. The interview schedule covered four broad areas to build case studies of the participants. The first part of the interview schedule attempted to find out about participants family background, socioeconomic situation and educational background. The second part of the interview schedule asked questions to the participants about learning and using English; participants' attitudes about a possible socioeconomic developmental role of English and the role of English in their lives. The final part of the interview schedule focused on the role English in their professional and personal lives and what challenges they face to access English education.
- **Socioeconomic record sheet:** Given the fact that the research focused on the role of English to mediate the socioeconomic empowerment of women, a socioeconomic record sheet was used to know the socioeconomic situation of the participants. The record sheet comprised information about participants' social class, education, monthly income etc. The purpose was to get concrete idea about the current social and economic circumstances of the participants.

- **Field notes and photographs:** Besides the interview and socioeconomic record sheet, field notes and photographs were also used as instruments. The purpose of photographs was to increase the visual understandings of the researchers about the socioeconomic situations of the participants and the geo-social setting of the two research sites.

Procedure

The semi-structured interview schedule was trialed with two participants before it was finalised for data collection. The purpose of trailing the drafted interview schedule was to see its efficacy in answering the research questions and its feasibility in terms of allotted time and comfort of the participants. Based on the trialing, several areas were diagnosed which were vague, repetitive and had no clear link with the research questions. In light of that, the interview schedule was revised and modified and subsequently finalised. The trialed and finalized instrument was used for collecting data. All the interviews were conducted either at the residence or at the workplace of the participants. All the interviews were conducted in Bangla and audio-recorded.

The participants

For this research project, five participants were interviewed who were all women with different ages and different professions. The age range of the participants was from 23-41 years. Participants were selected from five different professions which were Small and Medium Enterprise (SME), garments work, health work, NGO work and primary school teaching. For each of these professions, three participants were selected. In selecting respondents, preference was given to women from the rural area. Five of the respondents are rural area (Dhamrai, near Dhaka). This bias reflects the general demographic trend of 80% people in Bangladesh living in rural areas. A range of participants from several rural areas provided us scope to see a possible varied impact of English in the same profession. There was high variation among the participants in terms of their educational qualifications. Starting from participants with no formal education, there was a participant with a Master Degree. Similarly, there was variation in terms of the monthly incomes of the participants.

Name(Pseudonyms)	Age	Profession	Education	Setting
Garments				
Sameera	30	Lining Operator	Secondary	Dhamrai
Primary school teaching				
Nusrat	24	Primary School Teacher	Bachelor	Dhamrai
Health				
Aisha	38	Medical Assistant	Secondary	Dhamrai
SME				
Shyamoli	35	Entrepreneur	Masters	Dhamrai
NGO				
Mariam	25	Computer Operator	Higher Secondary	Dhamrai

Table 1 Five Participants at Dhamrai and Dhaka

Data analysis

- **Processing of data:** The audio-recorded interview data were first transcribed verbatim. Each verbatim transcription was translated and was thematically arranged for analysis. Since the research attempted to build case studies on the content of the data rather than the underlying linguistic discourse, no major attempt was made to record the ellipses, false starts and hesitations of the participants while transcribing the data. During translation, attempts were made to remain as close as possible to the actual data.
- **Analysis of data:** Based on the thematic arrangement of interview data, 5 individual case studies have been prepared. Each case study first includes a biography of the participant. Then, her use of English and perceptions about the socioeconomic empowering role are covered. Finally, the role of English in the participant's personal and professional lives and the challenges to access English literacy are discussed. Based on the 5 case studies, emergent themes were identified for discussion and based on these recommendations are made.

To build case studies of five participants, the research was understandably dependent on the self-reported interview data of the participants. However, participants' claimed use or non-use of English could not be verified with the other concerned persons involved in their personal and professional lives such as their colleagues at work or family members. Moreover, participants' responses were short in some cases and framed by the questions which were asked to them.

FINDINGS

Background of Respondents

All five respondents were working women, belonging to five different professional fields: Garments workers, primary school teachers, health workers, SME sector and NGO workers. These professional fields are those most commonly chosen by educated young women in Bangladesh. The educational background of the respondents varied from 'no education' to Master's degree holders. Income of respondents varied from Tk. 3000/- to Tk. 16,000. The age range of respondents was 23 to 41. Thus respondents chosen for the study may be considered to represent a cross-section of women at work with varying degrees of chances of needing or not needing to use English, and varying attitudes towards English and its importance for their personal and professional development.

Role of English

In self-evaluation regarding proficiency in English, most of the respondents considered it to be low or poor; a few claimed moderate proficiency in English. As most of them came from a rural and somewhat disadvantaged background, they did not have opportunities for adequate practice in communicating in English. Where such facilities existed, a few of them took advantage of it and learnt English reasonably well to be able to communicate with others using English at workplace. But they all were highly motivated for learning English well and emphasized the importance of English for personal growth and professional development.

Garments sector

Sameera, a garments worker, considers her own proficiency in English as moderate. She works at a cap factory. Previously she worked at a Korean garments factory in Savar EPZ. In her present job, there is little scope for using English. In her personal life too, there little chance of using English. But she feels that knowing English may help someone to avoid being cheated. She also said that the ability to answer questions in English during an

interview might be helpful in getting a job. Thus English has the potential to provide people with the scope to improve their livelihood. As she mentions :

“If someone knows English, it is better for his/her because English is used everywhere. Even if you want to use the computers, you need to know English first...if someone wants a job, s/he will be asked questions in English first, not in Bangla.”

Primary school teachers

All the women engaged in teaching at primary schools had minimum qualification, i.e. Higher Secondary Level Certificate, and seemed proficient enough to be able to carry out their duties as English language teachers.

Nusrat [pseudonym] seemed confident about her proficiency in English. She also uses English in her teaching. She has to read the prescribed textbook and Teachers' Guide in order to prepare for her lessons. She generally uses what she calls 'simple English' in her classroom. she uses English in her class and encourages her students to speak in English. She uses commonly used words in English, gives instructions and commands to children in English. She claims that her English is good and her students can understand her perfectly. She is well aware of the fact that many urban schools and offices heavily rely on these facilities and rural people lag far behind:

“The use of English has increased in English classroom. Now we collect information from the Internet. I think the use will increase day by day. We will be able to deliver the lesson using computer. The students will learn more and with ease. The schools in the cities have already got computers from government. In village area people still do not know much about computer and English”

Health sector

Aisha [pseudonym] is a 'medical assistant' working in a health sector NGO. There is limited use of English in her job, reading of diagnostic reports and writing out prescriptions, and reading instruction manuals of different medicines. But she does not need to speak English, and there is no opportunity for her to practice her English. However, she finds there is an interest to learn and practice English language in the community she works in:

“People are interested in English. If people can use English, they will get chance everywhere. In foreign countries if our people can speak English, they will be able to get access there and we will be established. To Get higher education we will need English”

SME sector

Shyamoli [pseudonym] is a Master's degree holder and runs a beauty parlour. She is doubtful about her proficiency in English as she is not able to use English regularly. She does not need to use English at her workplace, but she had professional training in Calcutta through the medium of English. She finds learning English important and sends her son to an English medium school. She regrets the fact that she is not proficient enough and would like to have this luxury.

“My son is studying in Standard I in an English medium school. I face difficulty with helping him in studies, because I am weak in English. I wish to send him to Australia for study. Actually we do not use English regularly. For that reason we have become weak in English”.

NGO workers

Mariam [pseudonym] is a Junior Computer Operator in the Human Resource Department of a local NGO. Her assessment of her own proficiency in English is low, which she feels is impeding her professional development. She is expected to operate computers efficiently, but her low proficiency in English is restricting her wider use of computer applications and the internet. She is required to type and send letters to donors and other stakeholders, many of which are in English. She feels that in order to with computers one needs a good command of English. She thinks that better proficiency in English would be helpful for her personal and professional growth:

“If I could speak better English like the bosses, I also could have been able to interact more with them...I am now working in an NGO in a village. If I go to Dhaka and want to work in a private company or elsewhere, I will need to use English much more”

DISCUSSION

Major Findings: Sector wise

- **Garment sector:** .There is little scope for using English. It was clear from the respondents that whenever there is a need to use English at work, people with motivation would be able to use it well and are willing to work hard to improve their skills.
- **NGO sector:** The findings above suggest that a higher level of responsibility requires better proficiency of English for NGO workers. Respondents stressed the need for improving English language skills for personal and professional development.
- **SME sector:** The findings reported above demonstrate that while English is not directly needed by everyone in the field of SME for professional purposes, respondents in general felt the need for learning and using English for practical purposes of running a business or undergoing training.
- **Nursing sector:** It may be seen from the above that though knowing English is important in the nursing profession, it is not obligatory to use it in a hospital which does not provide service to foreign patients. But for developing a career in nursing, knowing English is essential. English also plays an important role in getting promotion. The level of English needed might also depend on the hospital one works in
- **Primary school teachers:** In general the school teacher believes that English is beneficial for people in developing their confidence and education, can create job opportunities, as well as promote their professional skills.

English language skills are intimately related for empowering women in Bangladesh. All respondents are unanimous in their opinion in this matter. In higher skilled jobs there is wider use of English. Learning of English ensures better income and better standard of life of women. Women feel empowered because of being skilled in English, both at home and in the workplace. Knowledge of English helps in the acquisition and use of computer applications and the internet.

CONCLUSION

This research has made an attempt to investigate the relationship between English and Women's Empowerment. The data suggest that English has the potential to lead women to a possible socio-economic development in Bangladesh. There are number of socio political issues that have been identified in this particular study that impede realization of the advantages of English skills. This research has suggested that there are more job opportunities for women in Bangladesh if they are well equipped with English knowledge. This means that English along with other skills can help reduce the social exclusion of Women. The orientation of English into the daily lives and activities of women in Bangladesh 'represents an unprecedented opportunity to meet their evolving needs and interests' (USAID, 2005).

Finally, the study proposes the following recommendations:

A support system can be designed to exchange knowledge and relevant information through English skills to women by women-specific support groups like infolady. This will help create a network that will promote more interest in English among women in Bangladesh.

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